

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship Final Four: NC State vs South Carolina

Friday, April 5, 2024

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse

South Carolina Gamecocks

Coach Dawn Staley

Te-Hina Paopao

Ashlyn Watkins

Semifinals Postgame Media Conference



South Carolina - 78, North Carolina State - 59

DAWN STALEY: Just want to congratulate NC State for making it to the Final Four, making it hard for us. It was not an easy win, although the score may say differently. But we had to play for 40 minutes in order for us to win the basketball game. So really proud of them and their effort to get to the Final Four.

And then I'm just proud of our team, to be able to play on this big stage and not play our best basketball in the first half and come back out and make some small adjustments and meet the moment to get us to Sunday.

Q. Te-Hina, is this why you transferred, to have an opportunity to play for a national championship?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Yeah, absolutely. And it doesn't feel real. I'm so happy we made it. We've got one more game left, and we're really looking -- excited for that.

Q. Ashlyn, 20 rebounds. You said last game you just wanted to supply some energy. Was that a focal point today or was it just doing whatever you could to help the team?

ASHLYN WATKINS: I think it was just doing whatever I could to help the team. That wasn't really a goal of mine, but I just went out there and played my best basketball.

Q. What kind of happened in that third quarter? What changed for you coming out of the locker room?

ASHLYN WATKINS: I feel like we wanted it. Our locker

room talk, we wanted it. I could tell by our faces and voices, we wanted it more.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: We just told each other we're good. We've been in this position before, and that we just have to come out wanting it more, and we did. And we locked in on both sides of the court.

Q. Talk about how important it was to hold NC State to five assists for the game.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: I thought that was great. Really our main priority of the game was to box out and rebound. Their guards average six, eight rebounds a game. So our main priority was to box out and rebound. But when you play a defense like that, we're locked in and we try to keep it going.

Q. You said in the locker room you were just talking about how you wanted it more. Was there any particular person, was it a speech from Dawn or Te-Hina speaking up? Who spoke in those moments?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: We all spoke as a team. That's how close we are, and our genuine bond is that we know we can do better. And everyone spoke up, and we just had to trust each other and know that we're going to come out in the third and do what we do, and that's what happened.

Q. You have gotten so close to a championship. How does it feel to be at this point, right now, one game away from the chip?

ASHLYN WATKINS: It feels good. We know our job isn't done yet. We have to play our butts off on Sunday.

Q. I wanted to ask your thoughts when Kamilla went down at that point. And how is she at this point in terms of preparation for Sunday?

DAWN STALEY: She's all right. She played. What they were thinking when she went down. You all can answer that. I thought you wanted a medical update.

ASHLYN WATKINS: I knew she was going to be okay.

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Kamilla is a warrior. She's not going to let an injury like that affect her. She's going to push and be ready for Sunday.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: She's not going to like this answer, but she's a beautiful Brazilian warrior. And she's just awesome, man. She's going to play through some pain. That's who she is and she loves playing the game. So she's going to push through that. Knowing we have one more game, she's definitely going to be okay.

Q. 29-6 run. Just what did you all hang your hat, whether that was offensively or defensively, and ultimately that led to tonight's win?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: I mean, Coach told us that was a six-point quarter for them. We were just like shocked because it didn't feel like that. It felt like we were just out there being locked in on offense and defense. And we just played the game we know how to play.

At some points we don't know what's going on. We just know we're having fun. And we just love being out there with each other.

ASHLYN WATKINS: Yeah, we played good defense, really.

Q. In that first half, the 10 turnovers. In the second only five after that. How were you able to kind of stiffen up and really, you know, carry through in that last stretch?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: I contributed four of them. I don't like that stat. Seeing four turnovers next to my name, it's kind of, you know, I'm mad at myself for letting that happen, especially in this type of game. I'll do better.

But we knew we just gotta do the simple stuff. We were trying to be too flashy. Some of us were trying to be the hero. When we move the ball like we did it makes the game fun and easier. And we just know we've got to do the simple things.

Q. How do you guys stay locked in? Because you've won 36 games. How do you stay locked in and focused in the game?

ASHLYN WATKINS: For me, I think we have a lot of fun. We know when to be serious. I think we have a good balance. And that balance is what helps us stay, like, locked in. Like we know we can play around with Coach and each other, but we know when to be serious.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Yeah, it's very balanced with our

team. We know when to take care of business, we know when to have fun with it. But we've done a great job so far and hopefully we can take care of business on Sunday and have even more fun.

Q. Ashlyn, you're back this year in a different role for this team. To come up so big tonight, how does it feel different, and what does it mean to you to have this performance in the Final Four?

ASHLYN WATKINS: It feels good. It feels good to show like what I can do and help my team. Like, of course I'm going to try to do anything that I can do to help my team win. And that's what I did today.

Q. At one point in the third quarter you guys went on a 17-1 run. I wonder if you can put into words or compare it to something, what it feels like to be in that moment to be that free and that focused and to have that kind of dominance?

ASHLYN WATKINS: I think that's what happens when you share the ball. Our team is not a selfish team. We know how to pass, and we know, like, what the right shot to take is. And that's what we did. We like to share the ball. That's what happens when you share the ball.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Yeah, Coach allows us to play free and play with each other, and just be able to make adjustments mid game and share the ball, as Ash said, and just be who we are. That's who we are.

We like to share the ball. When the ball goes in, you see a couple of people also get the ball in, and it just creates a rotation and that's what happened. And it felt good.

Q. Watching Kamilla play the way she played tonight and watching you talking to her earlier as you were coming off the floor, it reminded me of what you used to say about Aliyah and knowing she would one day play in single coverage, I think is how you put it a couple years ago. To know that you again now have a post player who can be that dominant in as big a game as this, what does it mean for you as the coach and the game planner and tactician to have that?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, you play to your strengths. Kamilla is a strength of ours. She's 6'7". She's agile. She can command the paint. She plays with a desire to win. I think she asks for the ball a couple of times as well, meaning get her the ball.

And it's that. It's a I don't want to lose, I don't want our season to end in any way, except the way I envisioned, and that's winning the national championship. And when



you can put your play behind your vision, it makes a beautiful memory.

Q. To the point about Kamilla, when I watched her today what I was thinking, I think she's gotten a lot better throughout this season. That's really hard to do because players are typically focused on the team, scouting reports. How has she been able to do that? And what ways have you seen how she's improved since November?

DAWN STALEY: Kamilla is a better practice player. She's a better preparer. Like she is more aware of -- or more in tuned. I think she knows exactly what we need her to do.

She watches film a lot more, like on her own. She watches with Coach Boyer. She was more willing to do all those other things that create an advantage for her when she's out there on the floor.

And then she is imposing her will each and every -- she'll take two steps forward, one step back, but they all do that. They all, as players, in this game, you're playing at a high level, it's hard just to do that consistently.

So, I mean, greatness is a process. And she's still very much in, I think, in the beginning stages of her greatness. I think you'll see her play a lot better when she's with pro players.

Q. What did you say to them after the first quarter? You guys shut them down to 6-for-28 from the second and third quarters as far as scoring. Aziaha James had eight points in the first quarter. She ended up with 20 but she shot 17 times. What did you say to them to have that huge run in the third quarter?

DAWN STALEY: It was just more simplifying what we were doing. We were victims of what we worked on, especially ball-screen action. We knew they were going to go under. So we worked a little bit on re-screening. And once they started icing us, we just kept trying to do the same things. And basically stopped dribbling -- more passing, more ball movement.

And once we started having that -- I mean, it wasn't magic. It was just simple basketball. And then we just started getting stops and we got easy buckets. And then we executed in the half court and built ourselves a pretty good lead.

And at that point it was just trying to keep the lead and play good basketball because we feel like good basketball is contagious and bad basketball is contagious. And we want to take some good basketball into Sunday.

Q. What about that third quarter defense did you like the most?

DAWN STALEY: I like the fact that we turned up the heat. I mean, we put a lot more pressure on them to go deeper in their offense. We put a lot more pressure on the basketball, especially their point guards, the people that were initiating their offense.

So if you get them to play a little bit outside of their comfort zone, you're disrupting and dictating. I thought we did a lot more of that in the third quarter that created some easy buckets for us.

Q. In that third quarter, where you only held NC State to six points, you guys held them to zero 3-point shots, and we live in an age where the 3-point shot is king. How important was it to keep them to such a low percentage, zero, and the lowest of the game, and what does that speak to your players as well on defense?

DAWN STALEY: We did a much better job than probably the last two games we had in running people off the 3-point line and making them play, making them two us rather than three us.

It was their willingness to lock in, just lock in. They didn't want to lose.

So a lot of what they said, Pao and Ashlyn, was, well, before we went into the locker room to talk to them, they had things squared away. They're like that. And they were probably talking more so about defense and rebounding.

Then when we came in, it was more just about making sure we are disciplined on our ball-screen defense, which was very good in the third quarter, and simplifying offensively. That's how you open a game up, when you're able to have that kind of a stretch.

Q. Coming into this year, other than Kamilla and Raven, you didn't have anyone who averaged more than 13 minutes a game as a returner. Now you have nine players that average 15-plus minutes a game. At what point in the formulation of this group did you know that you would be able to run nine deep? And how much of a strength of that is yours, do you think?

DAWN STALEY: When you go through a season, especially in the beginning of the season, they're all thinking they should start. They're all thinking they should play. And then you have to figure out what unit works well together. And then you've got to come up with the starting five. And our starting five was who we started tonight.

And then Ashlyn was probably a little disappointed that she wasn't a part of the starting five. But I do think it was the best thing for her development.

And then you've got Sania Feagin who probably thought she should have been starting.

But it's more about combinations and who plays well together. Obviously Kamilla was going to be a focal point for us. So who plays better with Kamilla in November? And now who plays best with Kamilla in April?

Right now it's Ash because there's nothing that Chloe is not doing, and it's everything that Ash is doing. And each and every game we could count on a different player. And that was enough for them to build some confidence, even if they didn't play as much as they wanted to play the next game.

But you can go back to them and you talk to them and you make it make sense to them. You don't lie to them. You don't sell them a false dream. You say, here's why you're playing; here's why you're not playing; here's why this person is playing more than you; here's why you're not; here's how you get more minutes.

And they believe it. They believe it because when their number's called, they come through. It's a luxury. It really is a luxury to have the ability to play as many players as we're playing.

Q. Is it possible for you to put into words how impressive a 20-rebound performance that was for Ashlyn? And how important was that for you when Kamilla got hurt and she was still there to fill the boards?

DAWN STALEY: I saw the two she didn't go for. One of the first -- they were, like, I told her that coming off the court, like, you didn't even go for the two that were right in front of you.

I mean Ash is Ash. Ash is she's a leaper. She's a jumper. She's a reactor. For her to come through for us was big. We don't win the game without her contributions. And I knew at the beginning -- I think Holly Rowe asked me before the game, what person.

And obviously Kamilla is a focal point. I know she's got to have a good point. But the X factor for me was Ashlyn Watkins, her ability to defend, her ability to rebound. The blocked shot was impressive. The blocked shot at the third quarter was super impressive.

So I mean, she's got good reaction time. And we're very fortunate that she plays for us.

Q. Raven Johnson left late. Is she going to be okay for Sunday as well?

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, Raven, unless she's going to be rolling around in a wheelchair, she's going to play. Let's believe that.

Q. We've heard some of your players throughout the season say that this postseason run is personal. And Raven Johnson saying that this was revenge season for her. How much has that message driven, from your view, the passion of your teams to win?

DAWN STALEY: I give them that space. Whatever it is that can get them to execute and play in practice the way we need to prep for games, have at it.

For me is it's about coaching and teaching and figuring out a way to allow our players to have their dreams come true.

I don't attach anything to our team besides being disciplined in how we need to play. Whatever Raven needs to keep her playing at a high confident level, whether it's revenge tour or whatever she comes up with, because every day she'll come up with something.

If you go ask her a question, she'll say something else. It's all kinds of tours. But I hope it ends in being the national champion.

Q. Your team had four free throw attempts for the game, two in the second half when the game was more out of hand. How much of a point of emphasis will that be going into Sunday to be able to get to the line more?

DAWN STALEY: I don't think we control that. I don't think we control that. I mean, Kamilla -- we scored 44 points in the paint. I don't think it's all clean, but we're not going to worry about anything besides scoring more points than our next opponent. That's one area we can't control.

But we can control how we execute and how we put the ball in the hole, how we rebound the basketball, how we execute ball-screen defense, how we win loose balls, and the intangible game. I didn't even realize that. How many did they get? 18, (indiscernible) or 18.

Q. You talked about Ashlyn a little bit. You talked about in the past her embracing being the sixth woman. Just in terms of her role specifically, she does a lot of the gritty stuff, getting on the boards, her

defense, being a rim protector. How has she embraced that aspect of it? What stood out to you about the way she gets in there and does all those things for you guys?

DAWN STALEY: Ashlyn just wants to win. And Ashlyn also wants to feel special. And probably each and every one of our players want to feel special. And we try really hard to make them feel special and make it make sense to them.

We know she wants -- I know she wanted to start. And we talked, we talked probably -- not right after the starting lineup was up, was named, but we talked about her starting. We talked about why, and we explained it to her. Then she went to work.

It was something that she couldn't control, but what she could control is working out with me once a week, just getting some extra work in and kind of familiarizing herself with where she had spots where she could be effective on the court. She's the one that did that.

And when we decided that's what we were going to do, I didn't text her. I made her text me to make sure this is something that she wanted to do. I did forget a couple times and she reminded me.

But it is that. It's a process of being great. It's a process of trusting. Like I do think she trusted me and I trust her. As you can see, she played a lot of minutes for us. She's a very integral part of our success. And she only started maybe four or five games this season.

Q. I was speaking with Raven in the locker room about two years ago being this time of year, injured, last year, as she described it, her viral moment in the Final Four loss. And to come here this year, be in the national championship game and all the emotion. She's said she made a lot of growth. When I asked her what was behind that, her first answer was Coach Staley. And a big nod of the head. What has the relationship with her been like as you've watched her grow from this time two years ago to now?

DAWN STALEY: Raven's process and development has been a treat because she's such a hard worker. Like, she's so into being great and improving and she doesn't mind putting the work in to make that happen.

She's happy. She's a happy young lady. Like, she doesn't have bad days. She comes in, she works hard every single day.

Now, some of the stuff that comes out of her mouth is, you

know, quite funny. So she keeps me on my toes when it comes to that. But I mean she's a point guard that has an insatiable desire to get better and to learn.

For someone like that, I'm going to give her every ounce of me. Like everything that she can take, I'm just going to pour into her.

But she came from a great high school coach, like, a great. She won multiple high school championships, state championships. She won multiple AAU championships. So she comes from a pedigree of winning championships. And when you have point guards like that in your program, they're pretty consistent with that.

Q. This is your ninth Final Four. Your sixth as a coach. You went to three as a player. As a player, you played for one national championship in '91. First, I wonder, do you remember that game pretty vividly, and what can you share with us about that game? Also, how many national championships do you need to win as a coach to take away the sting of never winning one as a player?

DAWN STALEY: I do remember 1991, New Orleans, correct? Up four, with a minute and 20. We lose the basketball game. Can I get in trouble if I talk about officiating here back in 1991?

I mean, there was questionable calls. And you might have to get the skinny from Debbie Ryan because I'm sure she remembers every single play. But I vividly remember us being up four and not being able to get it done.

I do think it wasn't meant to be. The fact that we won in 2017 made it really special, so special that -- I don't want to pat myself on the back, but my teammates, my Virginia teammates, when we won, I gave them miniature national championship trophies because they believed in that moment and they were with me in several moments that they deserved it. I wanted them to feel something tangible of winning the national championship because they gave me the desire to want to do it.

Now, I didn't think I was going to coach. I thought that was going to be that. But once I got into coaching, I wanted to check that box off. So we've won two. So that's a distant memory that has now been replaced with winning.

And there are much more people that you get to celebrate with when you do it as a coach, and it's so gratifying.

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